

Notes of a Mad Girl #4 - Austin Healey and Three Tires

His Austin Healey 3000 was a bluish gray/blue convertible. To say it had a real or comfortable backseat was verging on a lie. The floor on the passenger side wasn't much of a floor either. The metal floor was too thin and you seemed only inches away from the snow on the roads.

Steven's dad was a commercial airline pilot and taught his two boys how to fly a single engine plane when the boys were about 6 inches high. Somehow this also translated into believing that their boys had to do all their own car repair work.

The Catholic Church would have been proud that Steve's mom and dad separated but never divorced. His mom moved to Bear Rock's in a lovely cabin area in the foothills of the Alleghenies while his dad remained in the family house intermittingly between flights. His older brother, Tom, had long left the state to fly helicopters and much speedier aircraft. Steve travelled between the two houses.

That drive down the mountain to Mount Pleasant wasn't lengthy but it was switch-backed and severe. There was an emergency runaway truck ramp on your right for those unlucky truckers who found themselves without brakes.

Once when we left his mom's place and had already passed the emergency drive-ramp Steve realized that we had no brakes. We said nothing and I was kind of mesmerized by his eerie calmness even though we were passing cars and trucks at progressively insane speeds.

He didn't panic and he never made any quick moves. The Austin Healey was so low to the ground that the thought of rolling over didn't enter into our scared brains. We made it to the bottom of the hill without hitting any oncoming traffic and he spent days putting in new brakes. I'm pretty sure he had to fabricate more than a few car parts along the way.

I attended Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pennsylvania for three years. It was a Catholic College run by the Sisters of Mercy. The drive up to the school was the best part of that place and I did an awful lot of walking up and down the tree-lined road to meet up with Steven. When he stopped the car to let me in I started to scream. He thought that I had caught my left arm in the back of the car. He got out and within a second realized that he had parked the car on my left foot. Instead of just going forward over my foot he used his clutch to reverse which slid the car forward. When he backed up he rolled over my foot again.

The real story, however, is about only having three wheels.

Steve, our friend Terry Specht and I were heading down I-70 to Little Washington to see a play that Terry wanted to see. I was crammed into the back seat of the Austin Healy with my legs on the seat and Terry was smoking a cigar in the front passenger seat.

We started across a truly magnificent bridge over a deep chasm bottomed out with a wide river and I said to Steve "I think something shiny came off the car". Within seconds the forward right tire rolled past us in front of the car. Terry calmly took the cigar out of his mouth and said "now we know".

The car rolled for a short distance then dropped onto the right front axle. We veered sharply to the right and just when we got too close to the bridge rail Steven turned the wheel sharply to the left. He carefully went back and forth between the two lanes. A trailer truck started to pass us on our left as Steve drove to the right and just when the trailer truck made it past us we headed into the fast lane just behind his bumper. Again, no sound came out of Steve's mouth and with both hands on the wheel he carefully with the utmost precision made it across what I remember as the longest bridge in the world. As soon as we came to a complete stop I jumped out and ran about a mile back across the bridge for the knock-off.

Terry and I spent roughly two hours watching as Steven carefully filed new threads on the axle so that the small threaded hub like round object could again keep the tire in place. Steven said the knock-off

wasn't his and that someone had swiped it and replaced it with a bad substitute.

We slowly turned around and headed home.

Years later my dad often remarked that he really wished he had bought Steve's car for the asking price of \$500.